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Syria's Elite Military Units: Keys to Stability and Succession

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*NESA 87-10012
February 1987*

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Syria's Elite Military Units: Keys to Stability and Succession

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [] Office
of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with a
contribution from [] Office of
Leadership Analysis. It was coordinated with the
Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries
are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Arab-
Israeli Division, NESA, []

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**Syria's Elite Military Units:
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 2 February 1987
was used in this report.*

From the earliest days of President Assad's rule, Syrian elite military units—especially the praetorian guard responsible for protecting the President—have played a crucial role in maintaining Assad's authority over the government and the stability of his regime. Assad traditionally has appointed close relatives to command these forces in an effort to assure their loyalty. The mission of his elite units is twofold: to act as a last defense around the capital against threats originating outside Syria, such as an Israeli ground assault, and to defend the regime from dissident groups within the military and populace.

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The stability of the Assad regime will increasingly depend on the support of these elite military units—now comprising nearly three divisions—which are undergoing major reorganization in the wake of Assad's health crisis in early 1984 and recent shifts in his inner circle. The 1984 crisis precipitated a power struggle among the elite units, posing a direct domestic challenge to Assad. Assad's restructuring of these units almost certainly strengthened their loyalty to him and their ability to quash attempts by rival power blocs to challenge his authority.

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In the last few months, high-level personnel changes in the government—most notably the demotion of longtime Air Force Intelligence Chief Muhammad al-Khuli—have greatly increased the power and influence of Brig. Gen. Adnan Makhluf, commander of the elite Republican Guard force, and Director of Military Intelligence Maj. Gen. Ali al-Duba—Khuli's rivals for the privilege of protecting the President and advising him on intelligence issues. Khuli's loss of power ensures that Duba and Makhluf will have virtually unrivaled access to Assad and, in close coordination with him, tight control over military and intelligence activities.

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During the 1984 crisis, the aggressive, regime-threatening behavior of Assad's controversial brother, Rif'at—who commanded Syria's largest elite force, the Defense Companies—persuaded the President that he could not ignore Rif'at's continual abuse of power and the risk that other elite unit commanders also might challenge his authority. Despite his recent frail health, the President quickly reasserted his control over the rival elite forces, transformed the oversized Defense Companies into a regular tank division, and sent Rif'at and rival elite commanders into temporary exile.

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A renewed and possibly more violent power struggle involving the elite units and regular military forces is almost certain if Rif'at, who is still in exile in Europe, returns and tries to assume significant authority. Many of the President's most powerful supporters, including the elite unit commanders, most—if not all—of the regular Army division commanders, and Director of Military Intelligence Ali al-Duba, bitterly oppose Rif'at's return to Syria and his assumption of an influential position. Rif'at is a persistent wild card in Assad's usually careful calculations. The extent of Rif'at's support in the Syrian military and his intentions regarding his own political future are unknown.

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Aside from guarding his tenure in office, Assad almost certainly depends on his elite military forces to protect the relatively new privileged status of Syria's Alawi minority. Since he assumed control in 1970, Assad has enhanced the status of his fellow Alawis, who had endured centuries of persecution and poverty. Assad probably calculates that Alawi preeminence in Syria is virtually guaranteed as long as he or an Alawi successor commands the loyalty and protection of the predominantly Alawi elite military units and the intelligence services.

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The elite military units will probably play the major role in installing a successor government controlled by senior Alawi officers. Assad's efforts to strengthen the elite military units through reorganization suggest that he expects them to prevail in any maneuvering to install his successor and to prevent elite infighting that would threaten Alawi preeminence in a future government. These judgments are necessarily speculative because information about Assad's preferences regarding the succession are a crucial intelligence gap. The combined strength of the elite units, however, almost certainly could thwart any attempt by Rif'at to take control of the government.

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The regime that succeeds Assad most likely will be a collegial grouping of senior Alawi military commanders and intelligence chiefs, but it will not be able to count on the same dedication that the elite military units show Assad. Without Assad's skillful hand and broad support, the successor regime probably will crumble under the pressures of competition among Alawis for power. After Assad, therefore, Syria probably will have to endure at least one weak and troubled regime before another strongman emerges from the fray of Alawi rivalries.

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Syria's Elite Military Units: Keys to Stability and Succession

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Syria's elite military units, including the Special Forces, the Republican Guards, and, until the spring of 1984, the Defense Companies, deserve much of the credit for the longevity of President Hafiz al-Assad's regime.¹ They have prevented serious coup plotting and ruthlessly quashed internal dissent. Without the protection of these units, the Assad government probably would have long since fallen prey to the internal maneuvering that brought down so many Syrian governments before Assad came to power in 1970.

In recent years, rivalry among the elite forces has endangered Assad's grip on power and compelled the President to make sweeping changes in their organization and leadership. Within this still evolving structure, Assad has reinforced the loyalty of his key protectors and made them answerable solely to the presidential palace. In making these changes, Assad probably did not limit himself to the immediate need of reinforcing his regime's stability but anticipated the political turmoil that is likely to accompany the presidential succession. He undoubtedly calculates that the reorganized elite units will play a decisive role—upon his sudden incapacitation or death—in determining the composition of a new government and whether the transition will be violent.

We believe another crucial factor behind Assad's long-lived regime has been his shrewd manipulation of the various power blocs within the Syrian officer corps—particularly the elite units charged with protecting him. He has deftly played potentially rival

¹ In this assessment, the term elite is used to describe those units with long-established or growing commando (paratrooper, urban warfare, hand-to-hand combat) capabilities. These units are charged with defending the Assad regime and the Damascus area from external threats, such as an Israeli ground assault, and internal threats posed by armed dissident groups. The 3rd Armored Division also is considered an elite unit because it has played this dual role in recent years. Syria's traditional praetorian guard forces, the Republican Guards and the recently dismantled Defense Companies, are included because of their responsibility for the President's security.

forces against each other since he staged the coup in 1970 that consolidated his control of the country and brought the traditionally impoverished Alawite minority to the forefront of Syrian politics. In recent years, in particular, Assad has shown this skill in dealing with challenges to his regime. The power struggle in early 1984 between rival blocs of his supporters, for instance, seriously threatened his control of the government and spurred Assad to reorganize the elite units.

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Assad ordered major changes within Syria's elite military units to reinforce his hold on power in the wake of a health crisis in early 1984. At that time Assad repudiated rumors that he was near death by swiftly taking control of the elite units—including his brother Rif'at's Defense Companies—which were on the verge of battling each other for control of the government. To prevent a recurrence, the President directed fundamental changes in the distribution of power among these units. Among his most dramatic moves were the reduction of the powerful Defense Companies to the size of a regular armored division, the exiling of his controversial brother from the country, and the reassignment of the crucial job of protecting his regime to the much smaller Republican Guards. He also moved quickly to balance the power blocs behind other Alawite leaders.

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New Guards Facing Old Threats

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In our view, Assad's restructuring of his praetorian guard almost certainly strengthened its ties to him and its ability to deter other groups from challenging his authority. Even these elite forces—though assisted

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by an extensive and heavyhanded intelligence system—may not be sufficient to meet the persistent domestic challenges to the Assad regime. [redacted]

Assad's health will continue to be the elite units' primary concern. As the 1984 crisis showed, any suggestion that his health has deteriorated—such as extreme pallor, a poorly delivered speech, or a long absence from public view—is likely to spark renewed jockeying for power within military and intelligence circles. The elite units also must be wary of each other's aspirations for greater power, while keeping an eye on known opposition groups within the general population. [redacted]

Antiregime groups continue to agitate against the Assad government, posing the threat of assassination, which is difficult for the elite units to target. The wave of bombings in early and mid-1986 indicated that at least some of the Sunni fundamentalist dissidents have recovered from the brutal "Hamah solution" of 1982.³ [redacted]

Pervasive corruption within the government is partly responsible for Syria's grave economic problems and—of particular concern to Assad's elite units—growing public discontent. [redacted]

[redacted] Syrians are beginning to express their frustration openly regarding corruption among senior government officials, shortages of basic commodities, and austerity measures, such as the daily power outages throughout Damascus. Such a discontented public, although far from an organized opposition to

³ Assad sent elements of several of his key elite forces—Rif'at's Defense Companies, the 3rd Division, and the Special Forces—to Hamah in February 1982 to rout out Sunnis who were members of the dissident Muslim Brotherhood. Thousands of civilians were killed in the attacks. [redacted]

the regime, might be increasingly receptive to recruitment by dissident organizations—a pervasive trend that Syrian military and intelligence units could not easily check. If acts of antiregime violence become more frequent, the President will rely heavily on the ability of the Republican Guards and the Special Forces to protect him. [redacted]

Assad's Motives for Reorganizing the Elite Military Units

The power struggle in 1984, although staged by fellow Alawis, represented the most direct internal challenge to the regime since Assad assumed the presidency, and it compelled him to address issues causing discontent among the senior officer corps. Although the crisis stemmed primarily from a misreading by Rif'at of the state of Assad's health, it also indicated a dangerous rift among the President's supporters and anxiety among Alawi leaders about their privileged status in the event of Assad's death. [redacted]

The crisis was sufficient warning to Assad that Rif'at's Defense Companies—manned by troops apparently more loyal to Rif'at than to the regime—had to be disbanded. Assad evidently calculated that, by banishing Rif'at temporarily from the country and dismantling his power base, he could calm his brother's enemies in the senior Alawi officer corps. In the place of Rif'at's large units, Assad resolved to create a new guard force using his brother-in-law Adnan Makhlu'f's small but trustworthy Republican Guards. [redacted]

We believe Assad also redoubled his efforts to monitor the power balance among other Alawi officers, apparently mindful that any of them—with sufficient support—could pose a similar threat to him or the regime. By briefly exiling 3rd Division Commander Shafiq Fayyad and Special Forces Commander Ali Haydar—key protagonists in the power struggle—Assad attempted to clear the way for a new elite force that would protect his regime, not weaken it through infighting. [redacted]

The crisis almost certainly reminded Assad that the unresolved issue of his succession meant that any visible weakness in his leadership could precipitate

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Table 1
Syrian Elite Military Units: Personnel Strength,
Equipment, and Mission

Unit	Personnel Strength (<i>approximate</i>)	Major Equipment Inventory (<i>approximate</i>)	Mission
Republican Guards	10,000	215 T-72 tanks; 140 BMP IFVs ^a ; 18 BM-21 multiple rocket launchers; 6 160-mm mortars; 4 2S1 122-mm self-propelled howitzers	Has primary responsibility for protecting President Assad and visiting dignitaries. Will constitute innermost band of defense in event of an Israeli ground assault on Damascus or domestic insurrection.
Special Forces (Of the seven regiments, three [41st, 45th, and 54th] are BMP-equipped)	15,000	93 BMP IFVs; 126 120-mm mortars; 126 107-mm multiple rocket launchers; 84 antiaircraft-machineguns (14.5 mm/12.7 mm)	Primary responsibility currently is to maintain Syrian control in sectors of central and northern Lebanon, especially around Beirut and Tripoli. Also has an important counterinsurgency role in Syria. Mechanization of several regiments with BMPs will enable them to maneuver with regular Army units.
14th Special Forces Division	6,000	93 BMP IFVs; 18 122-mm howitzers; 54 120-mm mortars	Probably assigned to take up blocking positions in the central Bekaa Valley in the event of an Israeli ground assault up the valley toward Damascus. Also probably charged with defending the Beirut-Damascus highway approach to the capital.
569th Armored Division	15,000	330 T-72 tanks; 210 BMP IFVs; 75 BTR-60 APCs ^b ; 18 BM-21 multiple rocket launchers	Probably charged with augmenting Republican Guards' defensive belt around Damascus in the event of an Israeli ground assault on the capital.
3rd Armored Division	15,000	342 T-72 tanks ^c ; 210 BMP IFVs; 75 BTR-60 APCs; 18 BM-21 multiple rocket launchers	Charged with acting as the Army's strategic reserve, to be deployed where needed in event of war. Also might be used to augment defensive ring around Damascus or to suppress domestic insurrection.

^a IFV = Infantry fighting vehicle.

^b APC = Armored personnel carrier.

^c One of the division's armored brigades probably is still converting from T-62 tanks to T-72 tanks.

another—possibly more violent—battle to replace him. Assad's moves to undercut the Defense Companies and upgrade the Republican Guards indicate that he wanted to quell high-level Alawi anxieties about the most immediate internal threat to his regime: Rif'at's undisguised ambition to succeed him. Assad's decision to form a third Army corps responsible for protecting his regime from internal threats would represent additional insurance against a repetition of the events of early 1984. Finally, although Assad may have a successor in mind—such as his son Basil—his public reticence on the subject may be part of a design to maintain equilibrium between potentially competitive Alawi factions.

Alawi Military Support: Assad's Critical Prop

We believe the longevity of the Assad regime attests to the President's skill and long experience in maintaining a careful balance among the power blocs behind his senior military commanders. As a young officer during the Ba'th revolution in 1963 and successive coups, Assad became well acquainted with the crucial role military support plays in Alawi politics. The fact that Assad engineered the overthrow of his predecessor and fellow Alawi Salih Jadid in 1970 conditioned him to pay close attention to the strength and political loyalties of the military units under the command of even his most trusted officers. Clearly recognizing that the source of his strength—Alawi

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The Spring 1984 Crisis

President Assad's heart attack in November 1983 and his subsequent frail health set off a power struggle in the spring of 1984 between his ambitious brother Rif'at and other powerful Alawi commanders who have long disliked the President's brother. Rif'at moved his tank forces to cordon off some of the roads leading into Damascus and deployed the SA-8 surface-to-air missiles under his control to the top of Jabal Qasiyun, a hill overlooking Damascus. Rif'at's intentions remain unclear.

His chief opponents—notably Special Forces Commander Ali Haydar, 3rd Division Commander Shafiq Fayyad, and Republican Guards Commander Adnan Makhluf—clearly feared that Rif'at aimed to topple the government and immediately moved their forces to block him.

Assad's decisive intervention almost certainly was responsible for preventing fighting between his key supporters, according to the US Embassy in Damascus. In addition to ordering a reorganization of the elite forces, Assad attempted to defuse the crisis by appointing his brother as one of three vice presidents and sent him and his main adversaries, Haydar and Fayyad, out of the country into what he probably viewed as temporary exile. Although Haydar and Fayyad returned in a short time, Rif'at, except for a brief visit, has refused to return permanently until the President puts him in overall charge of Syria's intelligence services.

military support—could also be his downfall, Assad continues to rely almost exclusively on advisers of demonstrated loyalty who have worked closely with him since 1970.

academic studies show that Alawis significantly outnumber other sectarian groups in the Syrian officer corps and in senior intelligence positions, even though the Alawi community as a whole represents less than 12 percent of the

Syrian population. (About three-fourths of the Syrian population is Sunni.) Alawis command most Syrian Army divisions and all elite units, such as the Special Forces and the Republican Guards. The Air Force and Military Intelligence services also are headed by Alawis who are trusted advisers of the President. Also among Assad's coterie are several Sunnis—Vice President for Foreign Affairs Khaddam, Defense Minister Tlas, and Army Chief of Staff Shihabi—long among his most loyal supporters. Embassy reports indicate that, like other Sunni officials in Syrian military and government circles, none of these highly placed Sunnis has a real power base.

Although these officers are longtime acquaintances or even close relatives of the President, Assad guards against any one of them becoming too powerful by limiting their access to him and encouraging them to report on each other's misdeeds.

The President also periodically conveys his displeasure, usually through Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi, to individual Alawi commanders who, he believes, have acquired too much visibility or independence. On several occasions in early 1986, for instance, Shihabi reprimanded Alawi commanders at the President's behest.

Since early 1986, Assad appears to have delegated more authority to his Alawi lieutenants than he had previously, possibly because of periodic lapses in his health. The El Al incident in April, in which a terrorist bungled an attempt to smuggle a bomb aboard an Israeli passenger jet in London, and the subsequent trial implicated Chief of Air Force Intelligence Muhammad al-Khuli and fueled widespread speculation that Assad was losing control of his intelligence services.

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From Rags to Riches: The Alawis' Climb to Power

In addition to guarding his tenure in office, Assad seeks to use Alawi domination in the military to protect the relatively new privileged status of the Alawi minority in Syrian society. For centuries, the Alawis were a persecuted and impoverished religious sect living in the largely uncultivable mountain areas near the Syrian port of Latakia. Stronger Islamic and Christian groups traditionally prevented Alawis from moving into urban areas, allowed them only the most menial jobs, and barred them from the better schools. Assad grew up in the Alawi heartland during the 1930s and 1940s and experienced the majority Sunni population's discrimination firsthand.

During their rule in Syria (1920-46), the French encouraged young Alawis—Assad among them—and other Syrian minority groups to enter military service as part of Paris's strategy to gain control over the more rebellious Sunni majority. Academic studies note that, as Sunnis generally tried to avoid enlistment in the French-directed forces, Alawis used the military, with its educational and command opportunities, as a means of improving their lot. Through this avenue, and the emergence of the Ba'th Party—which emphasized rural social and economic changes—in the early 1950s, growing numbers of

The Alawi Heartland

Alawis managed to replace older Sunni officers in the Syrian Army. A noted scholar of Syrian internal politics observed that by late 1964, one year after the Ba'th revolution, the young Alawi officers had shed their provincial status and completely excluded the traditional Sunni leadership from the mainstream of Syrian politics.

[redacted] The incident almost certainly deepened the rifts between various Syrian military and intelligence leaders—especially the longstanding rivalry between Khuli and Chief of Military Intelligence Ali al-Duba—and probably was the primary factor, if not the sole cause, of Khuli's demotion in January 1987.

[redacted] Assad has begun to take measures to reshuffle Alawi alliances and prevent any power bloc from becoming too independent. According to the US Embassy in Damascus [redacted]

[redacted] Assad removed Maj. Gen. Adnan Badr al-Hasan from his command of the 9th Armored Division—a position he had held

since 1982—and put him in charge of the relatively insignificant Political Security Department in the Ministry of Interior. There were numerous rumors that other long-established division commanders, such as 3rd Division Commander Shafiq Fayyad and 1st Division Commander Safi al-Ali, would receive similar treatment. Assad may stop with Hasan's removal, however, calculating that it would be sufficient warning to other commanders not to become overly confident about their positions.

The Defense Companies' Rise and Fall

Shortly after taking control of the government in 1970, Assad placed Rif'at in charge of an elite armored unit to protect crucial government and

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military installations in the Damascus area. According to an Israeli academic, this unit took the place of an armored brigade commanded by Izzat Jadid, brother of Assad's predecessor, Salah Jadid. In succeeding years, this force—usually among the first to receive new Soviet weapon systems—assumed the character of Rif'at's private army. [redacted]

[redacted] at the time of the 1984 crisis, Rif'at's Defense Companies numbered nearly 50,000 troops and were equipped with the newest armored vehicles in Syria and its own intelligence, commando, and air defense units. [redacted]

Rif'at's personal style, combined with the disproportionate strength and preferential status of his Defense Companies, quickly antagonized other senior Alawis. His flamboyant displays of wealth and his reputation for brutality and corruption sharply contrasted with the President's moderate behavior and professed Ba'thist ideals. His soldiers, writes an academic specialist on Syria, "were detested because their high-handed, thuggish conduct, which included kidnapping,

beating, and extortion, went unpunished." [redacted]



Rif'at exceeded the limits of the President's tolerance 25X1 by provoking the dangerous standoff in 1984. As soon 25X1 as Rif'at left the country and order was restored in 25X1 Damascus, Assad stripped the Defense Companies of its commando regiments and its independent intelligence and security units. [redacted]



[redacted] Assad took control of Rif'at's personal Mountain Brigade, stationed in the Alawi heartland 25X1 near Latakia, and seized his SA-8 missile brigade— 25X1 one of two such units in Syria. Perhaps the most punishing blow to Rif'at, however, was the transfer of

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the Defense Companies' perquisite of receiving the newest, most advanced military equipment to his longtime rival, Adnan Makhluf's Republican Guards. In only a few months, Assad slashed Rif'at's imposing Defense Companies to the size of a regular armored division, seriously eroding his brother's power.

To ensure that Rif'at's connections to the Defense Companies were permanently severed, the President scattered or dismissed from military service many pro-Rif'at troops.

He put an anti-Rif'at Alawi, Maj. Gen. Hikmat Ibrahim, in charge of the division-size force, called the 569th Armored Division, that remained of the former Defense Companies.

The 569th Division kept the former Defense Companies' three armored brigades, which are equipped with T-72 tanks. It also retained most of the Defense Companies' garrison facilities around Mezze airfield, just southwest of Damascus, and assumed some of the Defense Companies' former responsibilities for protecting the capital and the regime.

Assad initially directed that the 569th Division be directly subordinate to the Army's General Headquarters but may have rescinded this when in early 1986 he created an overall command—the 3rd Army Corps—for the 569th, the Republican Guards, and the 14th Special Forces Division.

Rif'at's prolonged, and now self-imposed, exile has not diminished rival Alawi officers' concerns about his intentions. Many of them fear that, if he returns, his dissolute and often ruthless behavior eventually will inflame Sunni antipathy toward all Alawis and threaten Alawi control of the government. They strongly oppose any suggestion that Rif'at return. None of Assad's close advisers wants to work for Rif'at. Most observers agree that the President is unlikely to risk the wrath and diminished support of his closest advisers by complying with his brother's condition for his return: command of the intelligence services. Rif'at's avowed enemies—Air Force Intelligence Chief Muhammad al-Khuli, Military Intelligence Chief Ali al-Duba, and Muhammad Nasif, who, although he is not director, is believed to be the



Figure 1. Rif'at Assad with Hafiz Assad

real power within the General Intelligence Directorate—control the very services he wants to dominate.

Assad's views concerning the advisability of Rif'at's return are ambiguous, but since early 1986

Assad has been trying to persuade Rif'at to come home. During a Ba'th Party meeting in mid-1986, for instance, Ali Haydar's supporters were so hostile to Assad's suggestion that Rif'at return that the President retracted it immediately. Assad possibly views as embarrassments to the regime Rif'at's Paris-based magazine *Al Fursan* (banned in Syria) and contacts with such anti-Syrian leaders as Lebanese President Amine Gemayel and PLO official Salah Khalaf.

it seems that, on the issue of his brother's return,

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fraternal loyalty may have overcome the President's usually incisive judgment. Alternatively, Assad may believe that occasionally dangling the prospect of Rif'at's return in front of the President's supporters—who are united in their contempt for his brother—further hardens his own power base. [REDACTED]

The Republican Guards' New Look

Like the Defense Companies, the Republican Guards—formerly known as the Presidential Guard—were formed soon after Assad came to power. A small group of Alawite soldiers in the Air Force was selected for the force because of their loyalty to the President. [REDACTED] The elite group numbered fewer than 1,000 men, and its duties, until just after the 1984 power struggle, were limited to providing personal protection to the President, his palace and offices, and visiting dignitaries. [REDACTED]

Adnan Makhluḥ has commanded the Republican Guards since the late 1970s and, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is the brother of Assad's wife and one of his most trusted security advisers. He is also a longtime foe of Rif'at. Unlike other senior Alawi officers, Makhluḥ has not been inclined to use his expanding power base for personal profit or to maneuver himself into an influential position in a post-Assad regime. [REDACTED]

The Republican Guards have grown significantly in size and prestige since the 1984 power struggle, suggesting that Assad is expanding their mission to include defense of the regime from both foreign and internal armed threats. After dispatching his brother to Europe in 1984, the President promoted Rif'at's archrival, Makhluḥ, to the rank of brigadier general and assigned a high priority to expansion of the Republican Guards into a credible replacement for the Defense Companies. In less than two years, [REDACTED]

Rif'at Assad, Second Vice President

Currently in self-imposed exile in France, Rif'at is regarded by many Syrians as the second-most powerful figure among Syria's Alawi leaders and a likely contender for power in any succession scenario. Widely feared and distrusted by other prominent military leaders, Rif'at's influence is tied directly to his relationship with his brother and his past control of key military security elements. He is by most accounts highly unpopular in Syria; he has been extreme in his abuse of power for personal gain. His rash and confrontational behavior has sparked several leadership crises in the government and precipitated the 1984 power struggle. [REDACTED]

Rif'at was born in the village of Al Qardahah, near Latakia. He holds a B.A. degree in literature from the University of Damascus and was awarded a Ph.D. from the Oriental Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1974. He entered the armed forces during the mid-1960s and, following the 1966 coup that brought the Alawis to power, was given command of an armored battalion. Two years later he was placed in charge of an armored brigade—the core of what became the Defense Companies. To appease influential military leaders and begin loosening his brother's grip on the Defense Companies, President Assad appointed Rif'at to the post of Vice President for Security Affairs in March 1984. Rif'at has held high-level positions in Syria's ruling Ba'th Party since 1975 and is a member of the (Syrian) Regional Command and the Central Committee. In the past Rif'at has been supported by the Saudi Government, particularly Crown Prince Abdallah, probably because he is indirectly related to Abdallah by marriage. Rif'at is 49. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the Republican Guards' personnel strength jumped from 1,000 to almost 9,000. In 1985 it was the first Syrian unit to receive recently delivered late-model T-72 M1981/3 tanks—which previously had never been observed with non-Soviet forces. Later that year, during contract negotiations to upgrade communications gear, [REDACTED]

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Adnan Makhluf, Commander, Republican Guards

Brig. Gen. Adnan Makhluf, a brother of Assad's wife, is considered one of the President's closest confidants and receives his unwavering backing, both politically and materially. Though a member of the ruling Ba'ath Party, Makhluf adheres only to the President's policies and not to any party ideology. During Assad's health crisis in late 1983, Makhluf was the only person, aside from the President's immediate family and medical staff, who had direct access to the President, [redacted]

Like many of Assad's supporters, Makhluf dislikes Rif'at. Makhluf was once Rif'at's deputy in the Defense Companies and was summarily dismissed in 1979 over a dispute concerning private business dealings. [redacted]

Makhluf is staunchly pro-Soviet and a believer in Soviet weaponry. His antipathy toward the United States leads him to hold it responsible for all Middle Eastern problems. He is regarded by his peers as a first-rate officer, but he trusts few of his subordinates and makes most decisions himself. [redacted]

Makhluf, an Alawi, is from Assad's hometown near Latakia. He graduated from the Syrian Military Academy as a tank officer sometime in the early 1960s and later graduated first in his class at an unspecified Syrian school for senior officers. Makhluf subsequently received airborne training in the USSR. He was appointed head of military police in the Damascus region and served in that position and later as Rif'at's deputy in the Defense Companies until his transfer to the Republican Guards. Makhluf has a brother, Muhammad, who also serves as an adviser to Assad. Makhluf is in his midforties. [redacted]

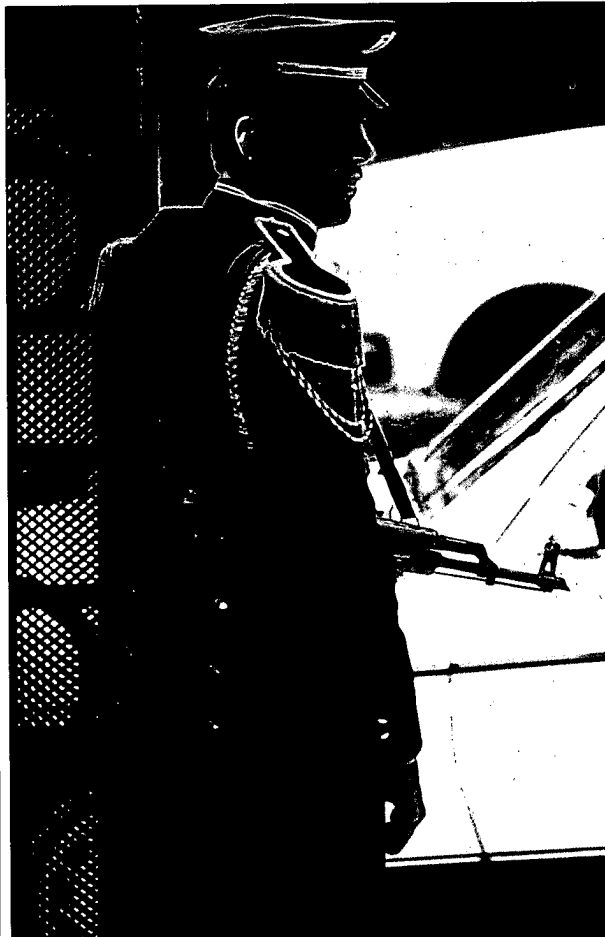


Figure 2. Republican Guards soldier, 1983 [redacted]

difficulties, [redacted]
attache. [redacted]

The US defense attache also has noted expansion and increased activity at the Republican Guards camp near Dummar, just west of Damascus, and a Republican Guards facility near 'Artuz, about 14 kilometers southwest of the capital. [redacted]

[redacted] the assignment of the President's 25-year-old son Basil to the Republican Guards in early 1986 was further proof of the importance Assad attaches to this unit. [redacted]

Other Elite Military Units

Two other elite military units protect the regime and are likely to play key roles in quashing dissident

the Republican Guards were exempt from a presidential directive that temporarily canceled or delayed military procurement because of Syria's financial

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challenges and in the post-Assad transition. Their importance was underscored in 1984 when Assad temporarily took control of these two crucial forces—Maj. Gen. Shafiq Fayyad's 3rd Armored Division and the Special Forces commanded by Maj. Gen. Ali Haydar—as part of his scheme to resolve the power struggle. Fayyad and Haydar were Rif'at's principal opponents during the crisis. Assad probably took this unusual step to ensure that the divisions cooperated with his plans to reorganize them, to discipline their commanders, and to compensate for their absence, since he had ordered them both into temporary exile. Although Fayyad and Haydar are in Assad's inner circle of trusted military advisers, the President may have calculated that they, too, should be reminded of his authority. []

Fayyad's 3rd Armored Division has long been considered one of the Army's strongest units and its strategic reserve—to provide support to any of the Army corps in their respective missions. It was dispatched to Aleppo and Hamah in 1980 and 1982, respectively, to crush fundamentalist Sunni dissidents. Several of the division's brigades were stationed in Lebanon for nearly three years following the Israeli invasion in 1982. The 3rd Division played a key role in Syria's largest multidivisional field exercise in late 1985, defending the southern approaches to Damascus from a simulated Israeli ground attack. []

Like most other top-ranking Assad loyalists, Special Forces commander Ali Haydar has been one of the President's confidants (and one of Rif'at's most outspoken opponents) since the first years of the regime. Despite occasional reports from the US Embassy in Damascus [] that Haydar is in trouble with Assad—for taking unauthorized action or becoming too prominent—he probably will remain one of Assad's closest advisers. His Special Forces troops, many of whom are stationed in Lebanon, are widely considered among the most competent and loyal in the Syrian military. Israeli troops who fought against them during the war in Lebanon in 1982 described them as Syria's most disciplined and courageous fighters. []

Shafiq Fayyad, Commander, 3rd Armored Division

[]
[] *Maj. Gen. Shafiq Fayyad's primary credentials for commanding the 3rd Armored Division are his status as an Alawi officer loyal to Assad and their relationship as maternal first cousins. Once considered a supporter of Rif'at, Fayyad shifted his loyalty to the President when Rif'at failed in his aggressive efforts to ensure his succession.* []

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Continuing hostility between Fayyad and Rif'at after the power struggle prompted Assad to order the two to reconcile. The President arranged the engagement of Rif'at's daughter to Fayyad's son, according to the US Embassy in Damascus, to further ease tension within the Alawi military leadership. Fayyad also has had recurrent differences with Haydar and Army Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi. Fayyad is considered ambivalent in his opinions of the superpowers. []

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Fayyad is from Assad's hometown near Latakia. During the 1960s, Fayyad served as an Army transport officer. Though he lacked experience, Fayyad commanded an armored brigade during the early 1970s before his assignment to the 3rd Armored Division. He has served on the Supreme Military Council, Syria's highest military advisory group, since 1984. He has been a member of the Ba'th Party Central Committee since it was formed in 1980. Fayyad is in his early fifties. []

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Because of these characteristics, Assad chose Haydar's mostly Alawi troops to crush the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood insurgency in the city of Hamah in early 1982. He also sent rival troops in Rif'at's Defense Companies to rout out the insurgents. The President initially had dispatched regular Army units—composed mostly of Sunnis commanded by Alawis—to crush the rebellion, but many troops refused to attack fellow Sunnis and compatriots resident in Hamah. []

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[] major elements of an entire brigade mutinied almost immediately and joined forces with the besieged Hamah residents. Despite this initial disarray,

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Assad's elite forces took brutal vengeance on the dissident Muslim Brothers and, in the process, killed thousands of civilians and reduced large sections of the city to rubble. [redacted]

The Intelligence Magnates

[redacted] intelligence directors Duba, Nasif, and Khuli—at least until his demotion in January—wield considerable influence with Assad but have no independent power bases that could threaten regime stability. Both Khuli and Duba have worked with Assad since at least the late 1960s, and Nasif is related by marriage to Assad's wife. [redacted]

According to the US Embassy, Khuli had most of his power stripped away in January 1987, and he may soon be removed from office altogether. This will benefit Military Intelligence Chief Maj. Gen. Ali al-Duba by placing him in an uncontested position as Assad's premier intelligence adviser. Brig. Gen. Adnan Makhluaf, commander of the Republican

Guards, will also benefit by gaining primary responsibility for the personal security of the President and visiting dignitaries, since Khuli's Air Force security detachment—which previously vied for those responsibilities—presumably has been disbanded. In close coordination with Assad, Duba and Makhluaf will have virtual control over military and intelligence operations. They also almost certainly will play key roles in any transition to a post-Assad regime. [redacted]

Assad's moves against Khuli—one of his closest associates since the mid-1960s—almost certainly were directly related to the President's anger over Khuli's involvement in the botched attempt in April 1986 to plant a bomb aboard an El Al passenger aircraft in London. At the least, Assad intended to use Khuli's demotion to repair relations with the United States, Great Britain, and other nations outraged by evidence of official Syrian backing of the terrorist incident. Khuli's demotion also suggests that Assad did not

Ali Haydar, Commander, Special Forces

Maj. Gen. Ali Haydar is a key member of Assad's inner circle and enjoys considerable influence with the President. Though loyal to Assad, Haydar is widely known to have ambitions of his own. Haydar's Special Forces were established in 1972 in part to serve as a counterweight to Rif'at's Defense Companies. The rivalry between the two services deepened to a personal enmity between the two commanders during the power struggle in 1984. Haydar's anti-Rif'at stand gained him important allies among Syria's military and security services, including Army Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi and Director of Military Intelligence Ali al-Duba, [redacted]

Haydar is widely respected among both his peers and his subordinates and is known for his relative honesty. [redacted] Haydar is generally considered to be pro-Soviet as far as Syria's military relations are concerned but is a staunch Syrian nationalist in all other respects. [redacted]

Haydar is an Alawi from the town of Jablah in Muhafazah al Ladhiqiyah (Latakia Province). He is a graduate of both the Syrian Military Academy and the Army Staff College. Since 1969 he has commanded several paratrooper and commando units that eventually became part of the Special Forces. His forces have played an important role in Syrian military operations in Lebanon and in domestic counter-insurgency operations. Haydar has been a member of the Ba'th Party Central Committee since its inception in 1980. His older son, Yasir, is a close friend of Basil Assad, the President's son, and Firas Tlas, son of the Minister of Defense. Haydar is about 50. [redacted]

specifically authorize the attempt to destroy the passenger jet and was furious with Khuli for acting independently or for bungling the operation. [redacted]

As Director of Military Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Ali al-Duba is charged with monitoring the Army to detect signs of dissidence within its ranks, and he

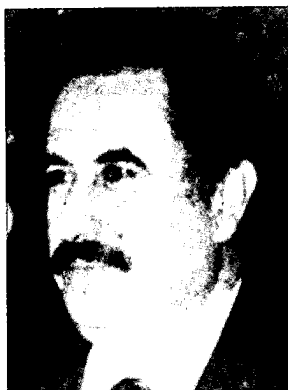


Figure 5. Khuli [redacted]



Figure 6. Duba [redacted]

oversees external espionage and sabotage activities. He strongly opposes Rif'at, who he fears may eventually unseat him as head of Military Intelligence. Duba is a member of Assad's inner circle of advisers and, [redacted] has the strongest links to senior Alawi division commanders. [redacted]

Although Khuli's recent troubles have improved Duba's standing with the President, Duba commands no troops and could not install himself or a favored candidate as president during a succession crisis. Nonetheless, with the continued support of many of the division commanders, Duba probably could wield considerable influence during the critical transition to a post-Assad regime. He probably would play a backstage role in supporting a coalition of Alawi military officers in a temporary government and would do everything in his power to prevent Rif'at from gaining any authority in the successor regime.⁵

The New Army Corps: Improving Regime Protection

In keeping with his resolve to prevent another dangerous and embarrassing power struggle between his key supporters, Assad—soon after the 1984 crisis—allegedly ordered the creation of an overall command for some of the elite units. He revived an older proposal for the creation of a third Army corps that [redacted] [redacted] would be responsible for protecting his regime and crucial centers of power in the Damascus area from internal threats and foreign invasion. The 1st and 2nd Army Corps were created following the 1982 war with Israel in Lebanon to improve command and control of Syrian units facing the Golan Heights and Lebanese fronts. Assad probably calculated that he would exercise more direct control over the elite units within a new corps structure and ensure their reliability in the event of further internal threats to his authority. [redacted]

After at least a year of preparation, [redacted] [redacted] the 3rd Army Corps was provisionally established in March 1986. It consists of the Republican Guards, the 569th Division, and the 14th Special Forces Division. [redacted]

Rif'at loyalists, now dispersed within the Syrian military, expected Assad to appoint Rif'at as commander of the new corps, but, as of late 1986, no corps commander had been selected. [redacted]

[redacted] Each of the units allegedly incorporated into the new corps began developing its present force strengths soon after the crisis. As described earlier, the Republican Guards underwent tremendous growth, the 569th—Rif'at's former force—became a regular armored division, and the 14th Special Forces Division was created from commando units detached from Rif'at's forces and one regiment from Haydar's Special Forces. In contrast to the 1st and 2nd Corps, there are no indications that 3rd Corps units coordinate their activities or train with each other. Aside from the general mission of protecting the regime, it is unclear how Assad differentiates between the duties of the 3rd Corps' components. [redacted]

Capabilities

Assad's elite military forces, notably the Special Forces, the 3rd Armored Division, and increasingly the Republican Guards, together represent a strong defense for the regime. In the past two years their training for this role has intensified and expanded to integrate armored vehicles—late-model Soviet tanks and BMP infantry fighting vehicles—into their operations. The Republican Guards, in particular, have broadened their training program. Under the leadership of Makhluaf, an enthusiastic skydiver, many Republican Guard troops are receiving jump training. [redacted]

Organizational changes in the elite forces indicate that Assad expects them to play more diverse and critical roles in the event of clashes with Israeli ground forces in the Al Biqa' (Bekaa Valley) or the Golan Heights. Special Forces units, for instance, have become more flexible in the types of warfare they can conduct. They are already well trained and experienced in commando operations, and their BMPs provide an alternative to airborne transport into a combat zone and give more protection while there. The BMPs not only improve the Special Forces' capabilities in their traditional mission—as an initial blocking force that gives heavier armored units time to arrive—but also enable them to maneuver with armored units. Although the Republican Guards also have received BMPs—and T-72 tanks—Assad almost certainly expects them to provide the innermost defense around the capital and the presidential palace and not to venture far outside Damascus. The 569th Armored Division will provide additional protection by taking up positions alongside the Republican Guards and perhaps farther outside the capital. The 3rd Division would act as a strategic reserve, either joining forces with regular Army divisions or augmenting the defensive ring around the city. [redacted]

Despite their growing capabilities to defend the approaches to Damascus from invading forces, the paramount concern of the elite forces is to defend the Alawi regime from internal threats. Along with the Republican Guards, which—with their new T-72 tanks—probably will exceed the size of a regular armored division, the capability of the elite forces to crush organized opposition groups has grown in recent

years. The brutal Hamah massacre provides a useful illustration of the elite units' loyalty to the Alawi regime and the strength they can muster, particularly when working together. Some estimates of the number of noncombatants killed in the attacks are as high as 10,000—most, if not all, of them fellow Syrians.

[redacted]

These elite forces probably will cooperate in efforts to install an Alawi successor government following Assad's incapacitation or death. Their combined strength almost certainly could thwart any attempt by Rif'at to take control of the government. If Assad designates his successor, the elite units probably would array their forces to support his choice—unless it is Rif'at, and Assad is unlikely to choose him. Close ties among the leaders of these units and other senior military and intelligence officials suggest that at least some of the military will follow the elite units' lead in supporting the successor government. [redacted]

An outbreak of fighting among the elite units during a succession struggle would significantly weaken their ability successfully to promote a candidate. Individually the elite forces probably could not prevail over attempts by other factions within the military to install a successor. In the unlikely event that one of the elite commanders, such as Ali Haydar, tried to promote himself as Assad's successor, the resulting discord in the elite units' ranks could splinter them.

Outlook

We believe the elite military units charged with protecting and sustaining the Assad regime will play the key role in the presidential succession. Assad's recent efforts to strengthen them—particularly the Republican Guards—suggest that he expects them to protect Alawi interests in any maneuvering to install his successor. He also is probably relying on them to prevent a violent upheaval that might splinter Alawi ranks and return the Alawis to their lowly origins.

[redacted]

[redacted] At least since his heart attack in late 1983 and the ensuing power struggle, however, Assad must have given a great deal of thought to Syria's inevitable transition to a new government. [redacted]

Assad's appointment of a commander to the 3rd Corps, which may include the elite military units closest to the President, probably would reveal his strategy for the succession. The corps commander—still unselected almost a year after the corps allegedly was established—would have charge of the most prestigious and well-trained military units in Syria and almost certainly would enjoy Assad's complete trust. If he is not actually Assad's choice as a successor, his selection as corps commander would imply his support for the President's preferred candidate. [redacted]

We suspect Assad may have intentionally avoided making this difficult appointment. He may not have identified a suitable candidate, or he is shunning any appearance of favoritism lest he provoke renewed infighting among his Alawi supporters. Because the corps commander would enjoy such a pivotal position from which to influence the presidential succession, Assad most likely would not invite the outrage of his key supporters by appointing his unpopular brother Rif'at. [redacted]

Rif'at's prospects for influencing the outcome of a succession struggle or even succeeding his brother are key unknowns. That he has discredited himself among most of his Alawi peers is well documented, [redacted]

[redacted] If Rif'at is in Syria at the time of the succession crisis and has had time to rebuild his power base, he might effectively challenge contenders for the presidency—almost certainly sparking heavy Alawi infighting and risking Alawi preeminence in a future government. [redacted]

Barring a successful Sunni revolt—which is highly unlikely—Assad's successor almost certainly will come from the senior officer corps and is likely, by virtue of his long association with Assad, to hold roughly similar views. Foremost among these views would be the importance of protecting the Alawis' privileged status within Syrian politics, prolonging Syria's hard line on Israel, continuing efforts to extend Damascus's influence in Lebanon, and maintaining Syria's arms relationship with the Soviet

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Union. If Rif'at manages to reconstitute his power base and replace his brother as president—although unlikely—the new Syrian regime might respond somewhat more positively to US overtures regarding such issues as the Arab-Israeli peace process and state-supported terrorism. More likely, a new Syrian leader, other than Rif'at, will adopt the same hard line as his more experienced predecessor. [REDACTED]

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We believe that when Assad dies, the most likely immediate successor regime will be a collegial grouping of the senior Alawi military commanders—especially the elite unit commanders—and intelligence chiefs. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The collegial regime that immediately succeeds Assad is likely to be short lived because rival Alawi power blocs almost certainly will challenge it. The immediate successor—perhaps only nominally first among equals—will not have had the time necessary to strengthen his support and placate his opponents. Even if Assad approved his appointment or had privately backed him, the successor probably could not count on the elite military units to support him with the same dedication and loyalty they showed Assad. Without their unqualified backing, the successor regime would be more likely to fall prey to Alawi competitors for power. Syria may well have to endure a series of weak regimes, besieged with internal opposition, before another strongman steps forward. [REDACTED]

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